

Changing the Houston police pension system

SB 1462 by Whitmire/Heflin

DIGEST: SB 1462 proposed various amendments to the Houston Police Officers' Pension Fund law. The bill would have required that contributions and benefits for members be based on the highest civil service position held, instead of the second highest salary-schedule classification held, beginning with appointments and promotions made after August 26, 1991. (The Houston police chief can appoint assistant chiefs; the bill would have limited their retirement benefits.) The bill would have made a number of other changes to equalize contributions and benefits among the various groups in the three-tiered Houston pension system. It also would have increased monthly payments to retirees over age 65 to offset the cost of health insurance.

GOVERNOR'S REASON FOR VETO: "This legislation impermissibly penalizes persons promoted within the ranks of the Houston Police Department. In many instances these same persons have been held back in their career progress by discrimination in one form or other. This bill would institutionalize that unacceptable condition."

"An inordinate amount of legislative and executive energies are regularly consumed by internecine struggles originating in Houston and Harris County. These continuing issues should be attended to in Houston and Harris County and should not continue to occupy the time of the state government. 'Local' issues from Harris County and Houston are greater in number in legislative sessions than all other communities of the state combined."

RESPONSE: Sen. John Whitmire, author of SB 1462, said: "The governor did not understand the bill and was dead wrong in vetoing it. It was not a racial matter, but a matter of who would pay the retirement benefits for the chief [Police Chief Elizabeth Watson] and her political appointments. The governor was swayed by the mayor [Houston Mayor Kathy Whitmire] and her hired lobbyists. Unfortunately, as a result, the rank and file will continue to pay the retirement tab for political appointees. In no way does it touch the minority community because most appointments under the present police chief have been white males. This bill has nothing to do with who will be appointed, but who will be

saddled with the retirement benefits for the police chief's appointees."

"The bill would allow the city to pay the retirement benefits based on their increased salary as a result of their appointment. The city should make up the difference and the rank and file should not be required to foot the increased retirement benefits. Even if the city did not choose to pay the additional retirement benefits, appointees are not going to turn down a job that pays three times their previous salary especially if their retirement benefits would be no worse than what they are already entitled to get," said Sen. Whitmire.

NOTES: SB 1462 was analyzed in Part Two of the May 21 *Daily Floor Report*.